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ABSTRACT

This single-article issue discusses the identification and educational needs of gifted children. Giftedness is defined and a suggested set of levels of intellectual giftedness based on IQ scores is included. The special needs of gifted children are briefly reviewed, including: the need for a challenging education, the need for "true peers" that share their interests and abilities and accept them, the need for responsive parenting, and the need for adult empathy. The report notes research that identifies low self-esteem in exceptionally gifted children and the risk of depression and social isolation. Recommendations are provided for the identification of and program planning for gifted children, such as fostering special experiences for gifted children based upon common abilities and interests rather than age. A continuing education quiz is offered. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

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YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH UPDATE

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Editor's Comment

The issues surrounding the education of gifted children have been clouded by misconceptions, resulting in considerable frustration for the children and loss of their talents. Although middle-class parents are often able to provide enriching experiences for their gifted children, provisions for the education of gifted children who are socioeconomically disadvantaged is lagging. In this Update we focus on issues regarding the special educational needs of gifted and talented children.

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Gifted Children

"The United States is squandering one of its most precious resources — the gifts, talents, and high interests of its students. In a broad range of intellectual and artistic endeavors, these youngsters are not challenged to do their best work." - *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent*. United States Department of Education[1].

Case History

James, a first grade student in a suburban school district, was becoming increasingly unhappy in school and threatening to refuse to attend classes. The school staff observed that he was very intelligent but believed that the first grade curriculum provided adequate stimulation for him. After his parents sought a specialized battery of psychological and educational tests, selected to discriminate levels of giftedness, it became clear that James was an exceptionally gifted student with unusually high abstract reasoning ability and educational achievement levels well beyond a sixth grade level in reading, spelling and mathematics. The educational mismatch between the child and the curriculum was glaring. Most importantly, James was becoming increasingly resentful and angry at the tedium and irrelevance of the classroom activities. His parents, who had felt all along that James' abilities had not been correctly identified, were startled by his high scores. They understood, and the school team also came to understand, that a change in classroom instruction was needed. While the eventual educational plan involved many changes: grade acceleration, an individual science curriculum, and much work on independent projects, the essential first step was an accurate identification of James' level of giftedness and type of ability. Two years later, the school is continuing to individualize the curriculum and James is enjoying challenging material.

Introduction

In this century, considerable knowledge about gifted children has been accumulated, yet little of this knowledge has reached mental health professionals, pediatricians, school personnel or others working with children. This is due to the common and mistaken belief that these children - endowed with superior intelligence and/or talent - have no special educational needs. Although professionals have access to knowledge of the special needs of mentally retarded and learning-disabled children, there is no similar set of guidelines (such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - IV) for the evaluation of and planning for gifted children. Nevertheless research, both past and present, has examined the special needs of the gifted as a function of their intellectual level[2,3,4] and their areas of talent[5]. At the present time counseling techniques specifically for the gifted are being developed[6], and books for parents and teachers have been written[7].

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Definition

Much of the current work is based on the following definition of giftedness adopted by the World Council on the Gifted and Talented. The new definition recognizes the central importance of atypical development in the lives of gifted children and

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Associate Editor: Anita Gurian, PhD

goes beyond traditional, psychometrically based ideas to explore their educational, emotional and pscyhological needs.

> *Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally*[4].

Psychologists who work with gifted children are aware that, within this group, there is a broad range of ability and a wide variety of talents. Although there is no single code that defines levels of intellectual giftedness, one suggested set of levels was outlined in the Fall, 1994 issue of the newsletter of the Hollingworth Center for Highly Gifted Children:

Mildly gifted	IQ range 115 to 129
Moderately gifted	IQ range 130 to 144
Highly gifted	IQ range 145 to 159
Exceptionally gifted	IQ range 160+

The problem with many current intelligence tests (WISC-III, Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, IV) is that they do not discriminate well between moderately, highly, and exceptionally gifted children. Researchers have found the Stanford-Binet Form L-M to be the most useful test for this purpose[5]. The concept of different levels of intellectual ability with attendant differences in cognitive, affective and emotional functioning is basic to understanding gifted children.

Special Needs for Gifted Children

First, there is the need for education to be fitted to the child's intellectual level and areas of talent. Second, there is the need for the child to find "true peers" - other children of similar ability and age. Third, there is the need for an unusually responsive environment, as the child at high promise also requires extraordinary targeted input for the full realization of high potential. Last, there is the need for professionals who understand the accelerated developmental path of these children and who can respond to their, at times, accelerated and unusual emotional needs."[6]

A. **Need for a challenging education.** In a longitudinal, educational study of gifted children receiving a common, accelerated and enriched curriculum[7], it was found that speed and complexity of learning increase as a function of the child's educational level. Work in the national talent searches and in other longitudinal, development research has extended these findings.[8] However, current educational practice has not kept pace with the research and the Department of Education reports that "Gifted and talented elementary school students have mastered from 35 to 50 percent of the curriculum to be offered in five basic subjects before they begin the school year." It also reports "Most regular educational classroom teachers make few, if any, provisions for talented students."[9]

Educators point out that the teaching techniques and aims advocated for gifted students, such as critical thinking, creative writing, and independent research projects, should prevail in all classrooms. However, classroom teachers, faced with ever-increasing classroom size, are not equipped to provide individualized curricula at many different levels simultaneously.

The lack of federal spending (2 cents on every $100 for K-12 education is spent on the gifted) is supported by the commonly held myth that gifted students have no special educational needs. With few special programs, and little in-class modification, gifted children find themselves faced with the problem of entertaining themselves while other children master material they already know"[10]. Not all children are equally capable of challenging themselves appropriately. In the clinical experience of the author a range of behavioral problems (from daydreaming to school refusal) have resulted when the school curriculum was not sufficiently challenging.

B. **Need for "true peers."** At the higher levels of ability children have fewer opportunities for forming friendships with children of similar interests. The younger and less mobile the child, the more acute the problem. Terman understood this when he wrote about the most extreme example of this problem:

> *Someone has said that genius is of necessity solitary, since the population is so sparse at the higher levels of mental ability. However, adult genius is mobile and can seek out its kind. It is in the case of the child with extraordinarily high IQ that the social problem is most acute. If the IQ is 180, the intellectual level at six is almost on par with that of the average eleven-year-old, and at ten or eleven is not far from that of the average high school graduate. Physical development, on the other hand, is not likely to be accelerated more than 10 percent, and social development probably not more than 20 to 30 percent. The inevitable result is that the child of 180 IQ has one of the most difficult problems of social adjustment that any human being is ever called upon to meet."*[11]

In interviews, children and adolescents themselves speak openly of the need to be with others who share their interests and abilities, of the need to be accepted rather than rejected for their talents and of the strain of minimizing their talents in order to protect the feelings of others"[12]. Ability tracking and special programs do not fit well with the current educational focus on cooperative learning and classroom inclusion. However, many gifted children have described the social ease and acceptance they experience when they are placed in programs that include other gifted children. As there is no federal legislation that protects the educational needs of gifted children, schools do not always identify these children and do not respond to their needs by forming compatible groups of students. While "true peers" for gifted children can often be found in special education programs outside the public schools, parents most often assume the responsibility of finding these programs for their children.

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C. **The need for responsive parenting.** The myth that gifted children have pushy parents has many negative effects. It causes professionals to doubt the truth of information supplied by parents, to question parental motivations and to minimize the significance of parental concerns. The myth causes teachers to limit the extent of parental participation and to deny the validity of parental reports. Researchers, however, have demonstrated that parents are actually quite good at identifying exceptional development in toddlers, pre-school children[1,2] and school age children. In a study conducted during one of the regional talent searches, parents were found to be as good as standardized tests in predicting which seventh grade students would do well on the SAT exams.[3] In addition to their role as observers and reporters, parents have been identified as exceptionally important in the development of gifted school children and unusually talented young adults.[4,5] Most people assume that parents of gifted children provide many enrichment opportunities. In addition the research shows that gifted children make more requests and demands for more services, thus triggering parental involvement.

D. **The need for adult empathy.** Highly and exceptionally gifted children tend to think in qualitatively different ways from more modestly gifted children.[4] Among their qualities are a tendency to elaborate the simple, to think precisely, to simplify the complex, to remember with unusual clarity, and to reason abstractly at an early age. For example, they struggle with abstract ideas such as the meaning of life and death, moral and ethical issues at an earlier age than most children. They can have strong emotional reactions which require sensitive adult responses and understanding. In the author's clinical experience, these highly and exceptionally gifted children, sensitive to social nuances and quick to analyze events, can construct interpretations of events that are both sophisticated and incorrect. Adults need to be prepared to follow the minds of these children to unexpected places if they are to truly understand and guide them.

Giftedness and Self-Esteem

In her study of exceptionally gifted children, Gross[3] has reported that the self-esteem of exceptionally gifted students tends to be significantly lower than the self-esteem of average students, especially when the school is unwilling or unable "to allow them access to other children who share their levels of intellectual, moral and psychosocial development." Thus the gifted child is placed in the forced dilemma of choosing to minimize intellectual interests and passions for the sake of sustaining peer relations or of pursuing intellectual interests at the cost of becoming socially isolated in the classroom. As Gross poignantly added "The gifted must be one of the few remaining groups in our society who are compelled, by the constraints of the educative and social system within which they operate, to choose which of two basic psychological needs should be fulfilled. A number of the children have shown, at various times during their school career, moderate to severe levels of depression. For some, this has been alleviated by a more appropriate grade placement. For others, the loneliness, the social isolation and the bitter unhappiness continue." Mental health and other professionals need to be aware of the extent of this dilemma if they are to be helpful to gifted children.

Recommendations for Identification and Program Planning for Gifted Children

1. Take careful developmental histories. Look at many areas for evidence of accelerated language, motor, interpersonal and academic development.
2. Expect that parents will report accurately. Highly and exceptionally gifted children do unusual things at unexpectedly early times.
3. Observe the children's work. Ask for portfolios of artwork, photographs of building projects, listen to oral reading, explore math abilities.
4. Advocate for appropriately accelerated and enriched curriculum. If needed, document advanced development by individually administered cognitive and educational tests.
5. Encourage parents to seek out unusual educational and enrichment opportunities for their gifted children.
6. Foster special experiences for gifted children based upon common abilities and interests rather than based upon common ages.
7. Expect complexity in the cognitive and emotional experiences of gifted children.

About the Author

Julia Osborn, Ph.D., has been a developmental psychologist at Schneider Children's Hospital for ten years. She presently serves as a consultant in the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and is in private practice in Queens, specializing in working with gifted and gifted learning-disabled children. Dr. Osborn is also a consultant to programs for the gifted and has appeared on numerous radio and television programs.

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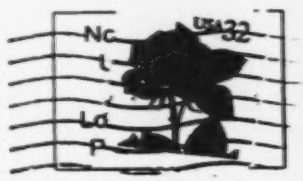

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CME Questions

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Question 1 Answer _____

The definition of giftedness developed by the World Council on the Gifted and Talented specifies that

(A) Giftedness is primarily dependent on cognitive abilities.
(B) The uniqueness of the gifted requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling to insure optimal development.
(C) Gifted children can be identified by their need for counseling.
(D) Gifted children usually have problems in social relationships.

Question 2 Answer _____

Research indicates that gifted and talented elementary school children

(A) Participate in many school programs specially tailored to their needs.
(B) Have numerous peers of equal ability.
(C) Have mastered 30 to 50% of the curriculum in five basic subjects before they begin the school year.
(D) Have no need for special consideration since their superior intelligence will automatically result in superior achievement.

Question 3 Answer _____

When interviewed, gifted children and adolescents acknowledge

(A) That their parents usually push them to achieve.
(B) Thay they enjoy being in classes that repeat material they already know.
(C) The schools are usually willing to make modifications.
(D) The need to be with others who share their interests and abilities.

Question 4 Answer _____

Research regarding parents of gifted children indicates that

(A) Parents are good at identifying exceptional development in toddlers and preschool children.
(B) Parents provide for gifted children by offering them stimulating activities and by responding to their frequent requests for special activities and lessons.
(C) Parents are as good as standardized tests at predicting which seventh grade students would do well on the SAT exams.
(D) All of the above.

Question 5 Answer _____

An important dilemma of exceptionally gifted students is

(A) Their self-esteem tends to be lower than the self-esteem of average students, especially when their access to other gifted children is limited.
(B) Their self-esteem is lower because other children make fun of them.
(C) Their self-esteem is high because their educational placements are generally appropriate.
(D) Their self-esteem is similar to the self-esteem of average students.

Question 6 Answer _____

Gifted children have special needs in the following areas:

(A) Education suited to their intellectual level and talents.
(B) Association with others of similar ability.
(C) A responsive environment and teachers who understand their special needs.
(D) All of the above.

Question 7 Answer _____

The development of gifted children is characterized by:

(A) Precocious social skills and above average intellectual abilities.
(B) Advanced cognitive abilities, heightened intensity and inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from other children.
(C) Equal development in physical, social, artistic and intellectual areas.

Question 8 Answer _____

Current educational practice

(A) Has kept pace with the research conducted by the Department of Education.
(B) Indicates that most regular classroom teachers make appropriate provisions for talented students.
(C) Suffers due to the fact that federal spending amounts to 2 cents on every $100 for K-12 education for the gifted.
(D) Provides adequate challenges in math and science areas but not in artistic areas.

Question 9 Answer _____

Educational placement based on age alone may result in

(A) Behavioral problems ranging from daydreaming to school refusal.
(B) An increase in self-reliance, especially in learning.
(C) Gifted children becoming more socially advanced due to the opportunity of working with all types of children.

Question 10 Answer _____

When parents suggest their child is gifted, the clinician should

(A) Assume the parent is inflating the child's abilities.
(B) Assume the parent is an accurate reporter.
(C) Assume the parent is inappropriately seeking extra attention for the child.